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Guinn says he'll fight mercury storage plan

[By SEAN WHALEY](#)
[REVIEW-JOURNAL CAPITAL BUREAU](#)

CARSON CITY -- Gov. Kenny Guinn said Friday that he is opposed to the shipment of more than 4,400 metric tons of stockpiled mercury to the Hawthorne Army Depot for storage and that the state will fight to stop the project.

"Nevada is not the nation's dump site," he said. "We will examine what options the state has to try and block the dumping of yet another toxic substance in Nevada."

The mercury, now held in three other locations around the nation, will be shipped to Nevada based on a decision by the Defense National Stockpile Center, which oversees the supplies. The shipments are scheduled to come at least by early 2007, but they could begin as early as late this year.

Also voicing opposition was Allen Biaggi, director of the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

"We are adamantly opposed," he said. "We're researching what can be done, what our recourse is."

The state opposed the relocation of the mercury to Nevada during an environmental review in 2003, but the decision announced Thursday by the federal agency will bring the toxic material to Nevada unless it can now somehow be stopped.

Biaggi, who wrote a letter opposing the relocation while serving as administrator of the state Division of Environmental Protection, said Friday that the state will see whether the decision can be challenged administratively. But he did not rule out legal action, either.

"We outlined four reasons why we were opposed," Biaggi said. "First, we've done our share for national security and national defense, and we shouldn't be saddled with this.

"Second, the DOD (Department of Defense) and the DOE (Department of Energy) have not been great long-term stewards of the environment.

"We also don't like this to be stored near Walker Lake.

"Finally, we don't believe there is much demand for mercury and once it comes here, it will stay forever."

The decision to move the mercury to Hawthorne comes only five months after a federal panel voted to oppose a Pentagon recommendation to close the depot permanently. The vote was hailed by Hawthorne residents who feared losing nearly 600 jobs in their community of just 3,500.

But Richard Bryant, chairman of the Mineral County Commission, said the decision to move the mercury to Nevada was a military one that was separate from the base-closing issue.

Bryant said he registered his objections to the proposal primarily out of a concern that the depot land should be used for munitions storage, thus creating long-term employment. Other than the receipt of the mercury, there will be no job creation with the storage, he said.

"It has been talked about for several years," Bryant said. "No one wants to see hazardous waste stored in their back yard. We're always concerned with toxic materials, but we're surrounded by it."

Sharyn Stein, a spokeswoman for U.S. Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., said meetings have been scheduled next week with military officials to learn more about the proposed shipments.

"We're always concerned about any hazardous materials that could harm the health or safety of Nevadans," she said. "We will be watching it closely."

Three existing mercury storage sites, plus Hawthorne, a site in Utah and another in New York, were considered for the consolidated storage.

Slightly more than 2,600 metric tons of mercury are stored now at Somerville National Defense Stockpile Depot in New Jersey. An additional 557 metric tons are stored in New Haven, Ind., with 1,262 tons in Warren, Ohio.

Robert Jones, spokesman for the Defense National Stockpile Center, said Thursday that the Pentagon began storing the mercury and other commodities such as zinc and rubber at depots around the country during the 1950s to build up supplies that might be needed in wartime.

In the post-Cold War era, many of the commodities are being sold off, but mercury, a toxic material that can cause brain damage, is not.

Before it can receive the mercury, the Hawthorne depot, 130 miles south of Reno, needs to complete preparations, including installing an impermeable barrier to prevent possible spills from getting into the ground.

Lt. Col. Johnny Summers, commander of the site, said the upgrades will take at least nine months to complete.

The Hawthorne depot was opened in 1930 as a U.S. Navy facility. Its heyday came during World War II, when 13,000 people called the town home, half of them military personnel or civilian employees of the depot.

The Army took over operation of the depot in 1977 and transferred it to a private contractor, Day and Zimmerman, in 1980. The Army retains command of the site now, but it's a privately run operation.

The depot holds about 300,000 tons of military bombs and other ammunition, about half of it so old or useless that it's scheduled for destruction.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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